The Washington Times
May 7, 2006

An author of the 1998 law creating the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom once described the body's mission in part as criticizing American policies that do not promote religious freedom. By that standard, this year's recommendations can be read to evince deep discomfort with some of the intolerant and repressive regimes the United States consorts with to fight the war on terror. The report is a sobering reminder of the ambiguities of working with governments like those in Saudi Arabia or Uzbekistan to accomplish our strategic objectives in the war. But then, it's worth asking what prospects religious minorities and dissenters in these countries might face without strong U.S. engagement particularly in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq. The answer, of course, is very bleak.

Among the commission's "countries of particular concern" this year are Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan, three governments with whom the Bush administration collaborates to varying degrees in the war on terror. By "particular concern" the commission means countries whose governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic and egregious abuse of the right to free belief, especially of religious minorities. To read the commission's entries on these Shariah-observant and/or authoritarian countries (arrests and torture for "apostasy," injury or death by sentence or mob violence and so forth) is to be reminded of how breathtakingly repressive the cultural and political landscape of most of the Muslim world is. These nominal U.S. allies are grouped with Burma, North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, China, Sudan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam as the most repressive places in the world when it comes to the freedom of religious expression and practice, and for good reason.

The commission also cites Afghanistan, Egypt, Indonesia and Nigeria, two pillars of U.S. strategy and two helpers, respectively, on its "watch list" of countries whose records are only slightly better (joining Bangladesh, Belarus and Cuba in winning that dubious honor). Afghanistan is a new watch-list member this year, for reasons anyone who followed the near-death experience of Abdul Rahman, an Afghan Christian, should comprehend.

And then there is Iraq. The commission says it is "especially concerned" and that "fundamental questions remain about the final content of the constitution." That document is fraught with ambiguities and the Shariah-inspired elements of it can be interpreted "to negate...key human rights guarantees and to discriminate against and repress both non-Muslims and non-conforming Muslims alike." It also cites "an ongoing stream of

violence and extremism in Iraq driven by a religious intolerance," which is quite an understatement. Iraq does not make either the commission's "countries of concern" or its watch list, however. As a country where people are routinely targeted for death by religious extremists, however, Iraq should clearly be regarded as the U.S. government's top priority, which the commission recognizes in language if not by category.

What would these countries' records of persecution and intolerance look like without U.S. engagement? A strong argument can be made that Afghanistan would be worse off, as undoubtedly would be hotbeds of Islamist radicalism like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The picture in Iraq is less clear, as radicals exploit the security environment to act out their violent beliefs. Overall, engagement not just military and political but also cultural and economic clearly helps open societies which would otherwise impose even harsher forms of state-sanctioned religion.

Nonetheless, a report like the commission's is a useful reminder of the great extent to which many of the governments with which the United States deals in the war on terror are our enemy's enemies first and our friends second if at all.